



**Testimony
submitted to the
Appropriations Committee
February 21, 2017**

**HB 7027 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE
THIRTIETH 2019, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**

Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee, I am Ann Gruenberg, a member of the Hampton Board of Education and President of C.A.B.E.

The Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, while recognizing the significant fiscal challenges faced by the state, is deeply concerned about a number of the proposed elements of the 2017-19 budget. The economic challenges faced at all of levels of government are felt most intensively at the local level – where we are in the middle of the budget development and adoption season. Rising local costs, in addition to the increased expectations to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for college and career, require at least a stable level of investment in public education. Districts and the state have adopted many efficiencies – and continue to look for additional opportunities to deliver high quality education in a cost effective manner. Joint purchasing of fuel, insurance and supplies, shared back office service, joint professional development, coordination of transportation, and sharing of certified staff are just a few of these efficiencies. A reduction in education funding to most communities in fact means a reduction in programs and services that are available at the local level. Increasingly, the burden for paying for public education falls upon local communities and their taxpayers. We have seen an increase in the number of times a budget must go to local referendum – and each time it is a lower budget that is proposed. Many districts have faced several years of 0% budget increases. Given the number of new initiatives and reforms put in place by the federal, state and local governments, this is a time where we need to maintain our investment in our public schools.

We strongly support the use of current student enrollment data in whatever funding formula is utilized, as well as accurate measures of current wealth and student need. Student needs should be captured using multiple measures. Use of Husky A may result in an under representation of student needs, as students who are illegal immigrants, green card holders, and military dependents currently counted in the free and reduced price lunch, are not eligible for Husky A.

The proposal to separate the special education funding out of the ECS grant, creating a new stand-alone special education grant which will reimburse school districts on a sliding-scale beginning at 0%, would expose districts to significant risks for the very high cost special education placements that sometimes occur, and would provide no state support to some communities despite the fact that there are children with special needs in all school districts, regardless of the community wealth. While this has been described by OPM as a “system” to incentivize districts to look at lower cost special education placements, in fact it shifts the risk for those high cost placements, sometimes necessary to meet the needs of students with multiple profound disabilities, from the state to the local school district. Since there are no changes proposed to the special education due process provisions, districts will be in no position to utilize alternative placements. Increasingly, districts must reduce services to regular education students to fund the special education mandates.

CABE is also concerned about the reduction in funding to a variety of programs that serve some of our neediest districts and students, including the Commissioner's Network, Priority School Districts, Bilingual Education and Primary Mental Health. Most of Connecticut schools of choice - Magnet Schools, Open Choice and Vocational Agriculture programs - also will receive a reduction in pupil funding amounts. We urge you to consider a funding system that includes all public school students and is based on their educational needs.

As we talk to school board members and superintendents around the state, who are already well into their budget development process, they are overwhelmed at the magnitude of the impact of shifting a portion of the cost of the state teacher's retirement system to local communities. Districts have been trimming their budgets and creating efficiencies for a number of years. They are now forced to consider elimination of all-day kindergarten programs, eliminating advanced level courses, increases in class size, curtailment of student athletics, and reduction in paraprofessionals. CABE is deeply concerned that provisions in the Governor's proposed budget will leave local and regional boards of education unable to adequately implement the educational interests of the state. School board members, charged with responsibility for delivering a free and appropriate public education within the budgeted appropriation, are in a unique position to indicate the local impact of some of the budget proposals.

CABE strongly supports provisions to provide relief from some existing state mandates, as well as proposals to increase the prevailing wage threshold. However, it must be noted that while these will provide for the more effective delivery of education and some modest cost savings, they do not compensate for the significant reductions in state support that will be seen by the majority of school districts and municipalities if this proposed budget is adopted.

The continued reductions in funding to the State Department of Education also directly impact school districts, as there is a reduced capacity to provide support and technical assistance to districts. This forces districts to turn to private consultants with subject area expertise, at greater local cost, or to forgo the support needed to improve educational programs.

Connecticut's strong public education system is one of our greatest assets. It is what makes us attractive as a place to live and work. It is imperative that we work together to avoid dismantling the strong public schools while providing additional support to those districts with the greatest needs.

We appreciate your ongoing support for the educational needs of Connecticut's public school children. We look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure an appropriate investment in public education in the state budget.